

# **FEASIBILITY STUDY OF ESTABLISHING A STATE PARK IN THE AREA SURROUNDING RUTHERFORD TRACE IN MCCDOWELL COUNTY**

N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2008, the N.C. General Assembly directed the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation (Division) to study the feasibility of acquiring land and establishing a state park in the area surrounding the Rutherford Trace near the Town of Old Fort in McDowell County. The area encompasses the important headwaters of the Catawba River, and represents an opportunity to preserve and interpret an important chapter in the history of North Carolina and the United States. There is also the potential for a number of recreational trail connections along the Catawba River, to Catawba Falls, and to other nearby natural and recreational destinations.

The area has a rich history as an early crossroads where Native Americans and early settlers converged at the headwaters of the Catawba River to make their way up over the Blue Ridge escarpment into the mountains. Old Fort was the location of Fort Davidson where General Griffith Rutherford's militia set off across the mountains in a war campaign against the Cherokee Indians who were considered to be British allies at the beginning of the American Revolution in 1776. Rutherford's march west through Swannanoa Gap and into the mountains became known as the Rutherford Trace.



Rutherford Trace Study Area

The Old Fort area played a significant role in the American Revolutionary War and western expansion. The area provided plenty of streams and wide bottomlands at the base of the mountains ideal for settlement and agriculture. The area has continued to serve as a “Mountain Gateway” with the establishment of a railroad and major highways through Old Fort, up the Blue Ridge to Asheville.

This study will review the criteria for establishing a new state park, land availability, and the natural and cultural resources in the Rutherford Trace area. In making this assessment, Division staff have visited the area; walked the trails over Allison Ridge, Edmondson Mountain, and Wildcat Knob; and met with the local land conservancy and local government staff from McDowell County. As part of this assessment, Division staff have reviewed the “Catawba River – Rutherford Trace Heritage Corridor Study” prepared by Tom Kenney of the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, along with other materials from the N.C. Office of Archives and History and the Natural Heritage Program.



Trail to Catawba Falls

## **BACKGROUND**

The route taken by General Rutherford's militia generally follows the Catawba River from Old Fort in McDowell County, up into the headwaters and over the Blue Ridge into the Ridgecrest / Black Mountain area in Buncombe County. Rutherford continued west through the Asheville area to the historic Cherokee towns in what are now Cherokee, Clay, and Macon counties (Figure 1).

The study area for a potential state park is focused on the area where Rutherford's expedition began, in McDowell County southwest of Old Fort (Figure 2). Four existing state parks are located within 30 miles of the study area: Mount Mitchell State Park, Chimney Rock State Park, Lake James State Park, and South Mountains State Park.

The topography of the study area features three prominent ridges: Allison Ridge, Edmondson Mountain, and Wildcat Knob (Figure 3). Most of the Blue Ridge escarpment north and west of Old Fort is part of the Pisgah National Forest under federal ownership. Much of the land south of the Catawba River is in private ownership.

Several large tracts south of the river, totaling 880 acres, have been purchased in fee simple by the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina (FCNC) through partnerships with landowners, donations, and funds from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund. In addition, FCNC holds a conservation easement on another 520 acres southwest of the study area. Much of this land was purchased to preserve and protect the headwaters of the Catawba River. The U.S. Forest Service plans to purchase 88 acres of this land from FCNC to provide access to Catawba Falls. In 2008, FCNC prepared a Heritage Corridor Study, which recommended additional acquisitions to protect the natural and cultural resources of the study area.

Access into this area is primarily along Catawba River Road, which runs west from I-40 Exit 73 and ends at a single lane bridge over the Catawba River that leads into FCNC property. Properties along the road consist mostly of modest single-family homes, small parcels of pasture, two family-owned campgrounds, and a town park with ballfields. There are some 25-30 different properties along the river and the eastern slope of Wildcat Knob. A 15-acre tract of commercial property behind the McDonalds at Exit 73 was identified as a priority in the FCNC report because of its location along the river and its potential for historic and archaeological resources. The tract was listed for sale at \$1 million.

Several large undeveloped tracts on Edmondson Mountain, Wildcat Knob, and Allison Ridge provide the largest contiguous area that might be suitable for a state park. Of this, the Foothills Conservancy owns 880 acres along the Left Prong Catawba River, part of Allison Ridge, and most of the north flank of Edmondson Mountain. Two additional large tracts (approximately 300 acres each) on the south flank of Allison Ridge and the south flank of Edmondson Mountain are nearly surrounded by FCNC property. Southwest of Edmondson Mountain, the slopes of Hicks Mountain and the headwaters of the Left Prong of the Catawba have been subdivided into hundreds of residential lots. Much of Wildcat Knob and the eastern slope of Edmondson Mountain are contained in a single large tract of 690 acres. This tract is for sale and has been

appraised at \$4.2 million to \$5.1 million. Within the Wildcat Knob tract, there is a 48-acre inholding on the south flank, a 33-acre parcel on the northeast side of Edmondson Mountain that the owner wishes to retain, and a cell tower with a ½-acre lease on top of Wildcat Knob. With the FCNC property and the three other large tracts, there is approximately 2,170 acres of undeveloped land across Edmondson Mountain, Wildcat Knob, and Allison Ridge.

## **NATURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE**

The study area lies in the upper Catawba River basin, USGS Catalog Unit 03050101. Waters of the upper Catawba River, the Left Prong and their tributaries are classified as C, Tr by the NC Division of Water Quality. This designation indicates that these are considered trout waters suitable for secondary recreation including wading, boating, and other uses involving human body contact with water where such activities take place in an infrequent, unorganized, or incidental manner. The topography of the area is generally very steep with elevations ranging from 1,400 feet near the river to 2,700 feet at the top of Edmondson Mountain.

The area under consideration has been assessed in other reports including a site report for Edmondson Mountain from the McDowell County Natural Areas Inventory, prepared by James Padgett and published by the Natural Heritage Program (NHP) in 2005; site assessments by Rob Messick on Edmondson Mountain (2002) and Wildcat Knob (2007); and a stream assessment report for the Left Prong Catawba River at the Sheila Adams property conducted in 2007 by Equinox Environmental. This collection of natural heritage surveys gives a sufficiently in-depth and up-to-date description of the area and was corroborated by Division staff on their site visit.

The natural community diversity level is moderate, with five types that are commonly associated with low mountain elevations. They are: Montane Oak-Hickory Forest; Acidic Cove Forest; Chestnut Oak Forest; Pine-Oak Heath; and Rich Cove. The entire site has been cut over, and old logging roads are common throughout. Fire scars were extensive on the oldest trees, and most of the site is maturing, second-growth forest that is still regenerating, with yellow poplar notably dominant across the lower, less steep slopes. Padgett noted and Division staff confirmed that Montane Oak-Hickory Forests are extensive. Chestnut Oak forests were also widespread, and Acidic Cove was common. There are scattered, small patches of mature, well-developed forests across the lower elevation slopes, but the forests, while intact, were not particularly mature. Portions of the north slope of Edmondson Mountain were dominated by shrub thickets of laurel and rhododendron. The ridgetops and steeper upper ridges are of higher quality.

Although several Watch List species are known from the site, no state or federally-listed species are documented. Once mature communities are established on the mountain, the north-facing slopes could be expected to support more diverse natural communities.

The 2007 aquatic survey along the Left Prong Catawba River assessed fish diversity, macroinvertebrate diversity, aquatic habitat quality, and riffle substrate quality. Overall, the survey concluded that the site has "relatively good" aquatic habitat. The fish diversity totaled 19 species, including one non-native (rainbow trout). Most species were indicators for intermediate levels of environmental disturbance. The macroinvertebrate diversity was high, scoring 11 out

of 12 points. Aquatic habitat was rated as "relatively high," with scores ranging from 83-88 (out of 100) on the sampled reaches. Riffle substrate documented excessive sedimentation at two of the three sample sites. Sediment sources are believed to be associated with residential development at the headwaters. Protection of land in the study area would help to protect water quality in this important watershed.

The study area supports fair quality community types that are common across the low elevations of the Blue Ridge escarpment. There were no community types that were of high quality or that are not already represented elsewhere across the North Carolina State Parks System in better condition. Padgett's assessment rates the site as being regionally significant. The large, almost contiguously forested area could play an important recreational and conservation role on the regional landscape. Although the site would not be considered to be of statewide natural heritage significance, which is an important criterion for the establishment of a State Park, protection of the site would preserve regionally-significant natural heritage resources. Land protection in the study area would also improve public access to Catawba Falls, a scenic and popular site nearby within the Pisgah National Forest.

## **CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE**

The Old Fort area has a historical and cultural heritage of national significance. As mentioned above, this area was the location of Fort Davidson, which provided protection to colonists in the 'western frontier' of the late 1700s. Rutherford's militia guarded this area during the American Revolution. The fort was also the base from which Rutherford began his fight against the Cherokee Indians and his expedition into the mountains. Mike Hill from the N.C. Office of Archives and History confirmed that the location of Fort Davidson and the trail that Rutherford took were along the Catawba River up to Catawba Falls and then northwest over the Blue Ridge across what is now national forest to Swannanoa Gap and westward.

Within the study area, the only historical / archaeological sites identified on N.C. Archives and History mapping are a few records of Native American artifacts found in the fields along the Catawba River. As noted above, the actual "Trace" followed the river to the falls and then continued out of the study area. Historical and archaeological site mapping does not show any records or sites in the Allison Ridge, Edmondson Mountain, Wildcat Knob area. The early settlements and trading routes were along the river where the individual parcels are many and the land cost is higher. It is likely that any initial acquisition efforts for a potential State Park would progress slowly and take some time to acquire this historical corridor. The larger mountain ridge tracts that are important for headwater watershed protection are available now.

## **STATE PARK SYSTEM CRITERIA**

The State Parks Act states that the state parks system shall consist of representative examples of North Carolina's unique biological, geological, archeological, recreational, and scenic resources. New state park system units shall be added by an act of the General Assembly and shall address the needs described in the Systemwide Plan. All additions shall be accompanied by adequate



appropriations for land acquisition, development, and operations. Addition of new units to the State Parks System should focus on preserving sites of statewide significance and on ensuring that representative examples of the state's resources are protected.

While expansion of the system is important, new parks must be selected carefully to ensure that they contribute to fulfilling the purposes of the system and that they justify the considerable public investment in acquisition and long term management. The Division has developed criteria for evaluating proposed new units to the state parks system. The evaluation criteria are divided into minimum and measured criteria.

The minimum criteria are used for initial evaluation of proposed park sites. The four basic criteria are:

- Statewide significance of the site's resource themes;
- Size (sufficient acreage to protect principal resources and to provide appropriate facilities with minimal impacts to principal resources);
- Absence of incompatible features (through roads, intrusive development, incompatible vistas and air, water and noise pollution threats); and
- Public access free of limitations inhibiting management and public use

Sites that do not meet these minimum criteria are removed from consideration. If a site meets the minimum criteria requirements, it is then evaluated using measured criteria, which include:

- Number of high priority resources;
- Rarity of natural resources;
- Threat to natural resources;
- Degree of threat / urgency of acquisition;
- Presence of rare and endangered species;
- Interconnection of the site with other protected areas;
- Presence of superlatives (one of a kind, biggest or best example);
- Regional demand for state parks system units that are staffed and open to the public; and
- Suitability for providing high quality recreation.

## **SUITABILITY OF RUTHERFORD TRACE**

**Statewide significance** - A proposed new unit of the state parks system must contain a high quality example of a natural resource (biological, geological, archeological, recreational, or scenic) of statewide significance. In this context, statewide significance means one of the best examples of its kind in the state, or likely to attract visitors from other regions of the state. The natural resources of the Allison Ridge, Edmondson Mountain, and Wildcat Knob area are regionally significant. The existing forests are relatively young and crossed with logging trails. The community types and other biological, geological, and scenic themes can be found in other state parks as close as South Mountains and Chimney Rock. The undeveloped mountain tracts do provide a significant natural viewshed from I-40.

The cultural and historical resources within the Rutherford Trace area are of state and national significance, but no specific sites have been identified on the large tracts under review. The most likely sites for early settlers and Native Americans would have been along the river where property acquisition would be relatively difficult.

**Size** - A proposed addition to the state parks system must have sufficient acreage to protect the principle resources. Totalling approximately 2,170 acres, the large tracts potentially available within the study area are sufficient for a state park. One of the available tracts was appraised by an independent appraiser. The appraised value does not necessarily represent the actual cost of a potential land purchase, but does indicate the approximate value of land in the area. Based on the results of that appraisal, land costs for the large properties in the study area would be approximately \$9 million for the 1,290 acres in the three private tracts. The 880-acre tract currently owned by FCNC would possibly be transferred to the state at little or no cost. The Heritage Corridor Study done by FCNC also recommends acquiring additional commercial, residential, and farm properties along the Catawba River and along Allison Ridge above Catawba Falls (approximately 600 acres) at an estimated additional cost of approximately \$22 million.

**Absence of incompatible features** - A new state park should be relatively unspoiled and should not contain incompatible features, such as roads that cannot be closed; intrusive development; significant threats to air or water quality that cannot be controlled; sources of excessive noise that cannot be controlled; and incompatible vistas.

The Allison Ridge, Edmondson Mountain, Wildcat Knob study area has a number of incompatible features. The Wildcat Knob tract has two large inholdings that are not likely to be available for purchase any time soon. One is 48 acres on the south flank of the mountain and is used for hunting. The other is a 33-acre tract on the northeast end of Edmondson Mountain near Little Deep Gap. There is also a cell tower site with a ½-acre lease on top of Wildcat Knob and a right-of-way easement along an old logging road to the site. Much of the area is crossed by old logging roads. One mountain cove on Wildcat has had numerous tulip poplars cut down and stripped of bark. Through all but the lowest areas, noise from trucks on I-40 can be heard. Also, as noted in the aquatic survey, the sediment issues in the river appear to be from the residential development around the extreme headwaters.

**Public access** - A new state park should have adequate public access and should be free from limitations, such as zoning or deed restrictions, that would inhibit management of public use. At present, there are two potential public access points off Catawba River Road. One at the end of the road crosses a one-lane wooden bridge onto the FCNC property. This access has 2-3 acres of relatively level land for a potential small parking area and restrooms. The other access is into the Wildcat Mountain tract along the logging road used to access the cell tower site. There are no known zoning restrictions in the area. The location of the study area is accessible from I-40 and presents the potential for a series of trail connections to Catawba Falls in Pisgah National Forest, to the Mountain Gateway Museum in Old Fort, down the Catawba River to Lake James State Park, and up the Blue Ridge escarpment to Mount Mitchell State Park.

A site proposed for addition to the state parks system must meet all of the above minimum criteria to be eligible for further consideration. The Rutherford Trace study area meets some of the criteria better than others, and so it was determined to be unsuitable as a traditional State Park.

## **CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Rutherford Trace study area contains a significant acreage of undeveloped land of which a large portion is currently protected by conservation easements and ownership by the Foothills Conservancy. The conservation and protection of the other large tracts, such as Wildcat Knob, would be beneficial to the region and the headwaters of the Catawba River. The area is accessible for walking and has the potential for several recreational trail connections. The study area also represents an important opportunity to preserve and interpret important historical resources and themes.

The lack of any state-significant natural features or specific cultural resources, as well as the number of incompatible features and potential management issues, make the area unsuitable for the establishment of a traditional state park. However, continued protection of the Catawba headwaters area should be encouraged and supported.

For example, the Foothills Conservancy is currently requesting additional funding from the state Clean Water Management Trust Fund. The N.C. Department of Cultural Resources operates the Mountain Gateway Museum in the Town of Old Fort. They could interpret the significant history of the Old Fort area and the Rutherford Trace. McDowell County and the Town of Old Fort would be eligible for funding from the local grant program of the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund. Through collaboration with the Foothills Conservancy and the Department of Cultural Resources, the county and town may be able to establish a recreational trail from the Mountain Gateway Museum to the Old Fort town park to Catawba Falls on the U.S. Forest Service property.

The Division of Parks and Recreation should continue to explore potential trail connections to Mount Mitchell and Lake James state parks, and should collaborate with the McDowell County Trails Association and other potential partners to further develop these trail concepts.



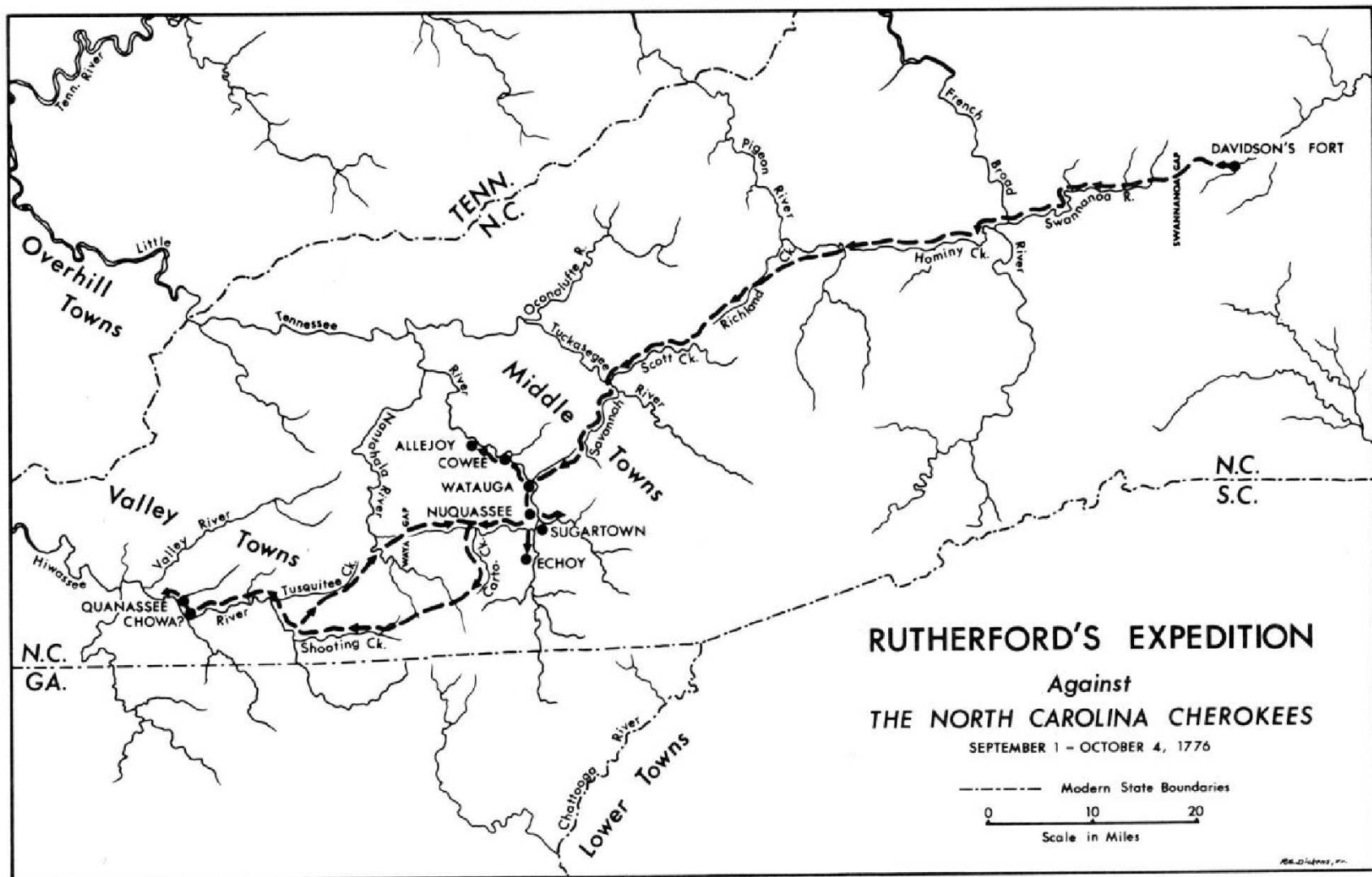


Figure 1. From "The Route of Rutherford's Expedition Against the North Carolina Cherokee" by Roy S. Dickens, Jr., *Southern Indian Studies*, Vol. 19, P. 7. Used with permission of the North Carolina Archaeological Society.

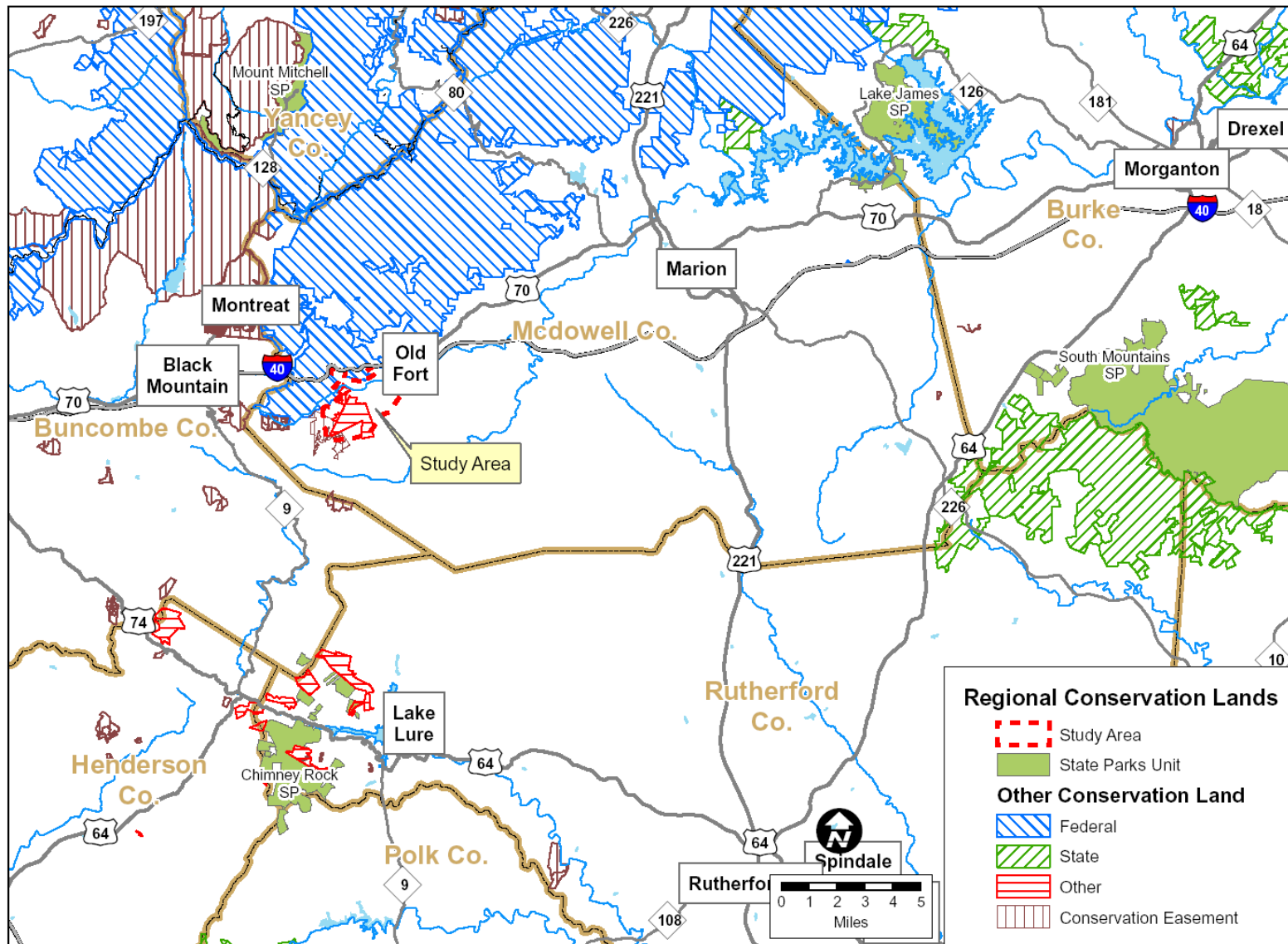


Figure 2. Regional Conservation Lands Near the Study Area



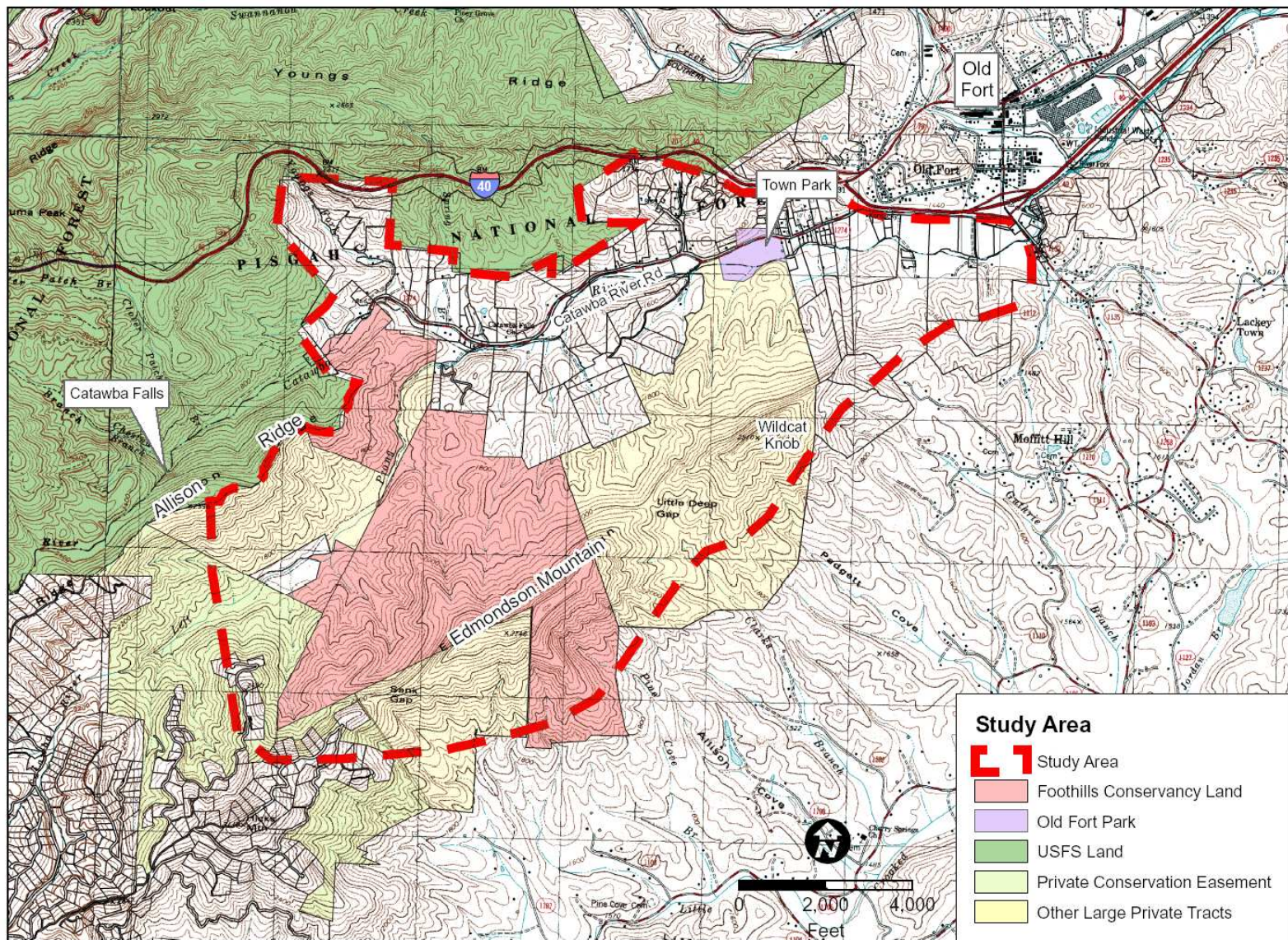


Figure 3. Study Area